

Clash of Views Part of Singapore Society's Maturing Process: Experts

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Singapore - From a record turnout at the annual Pink Dot rally and the rise of a counter Wear White movement, to protests against the National Library Board's (NLB) initial decision to pulp three children's titles after complaints that they did not promote family values, it has been a year when many Singaporeans were not only unafraid of making themselves heard, but also proactively pushing their views.

Political analysts TODAY spoke to consider these ideological clashes as part of Singapore society's maturing process. The journey would be anything but smooth, they said, as the Government, civil society and individuals try to shake off old habits and adapt to the "new normal" — or, in one analyst's words, a return to the "old normal" in reference to the '50s and '60s, when civic activism was high.

As current-day Singapore society ventures into uncharted waters, experts could not agree on how the Government should manage situations where opposing groups seek to shape public agenda. Should it proactively facilitate discussions or take a hands-off approach? Should it be an arbitrator and uphold "common values" shared by the majority or ensure minorities are protected? Going forward, these are questions the Government and public have to ponder, as one thing is for sure, the "new normal" — or whatever one chooses to call it — is not going away any time soon.

Institute of Southeast Asian Studies senior fellow Terence Chong said: "Increasingly different communities have become more vocal with their brand of values. This value (of) pluralism is something the people and Government must learn to live comfortably with."

He added: "The emergence of different ideals and visions for this country is also a sign of a more profound Singaporean identity — one that is not as two-dimensional as before."

In recent months, national leaders, including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, have cautioned against an increasingly fractious society.

During a live television forum in September, Mr Lee noted that, as society becomes more diverse, people are expressing themselves more passionately and assertively, trying to push society the way they prefer.

However, he added: "We have to set a tone where everybody converges to a middle and not have politics where I represent this group, you represent that group; and let me get what I can and you will fight for what you can, which I think will be very bad for Singapore."

Speaking at a Marine Parade National Day dinner in August, Mr Goh warned that if the "new normal" leads to "fractiousness, divisiveness and estrangement in the Singapore Family, we will be undoing what the pioneer generation has painfully and diligently built over many decades".

Mr Goh observed: “We still discuss and debate, consult and engage. But each group is more assertive than before in pushing its point of view and vested interests. Each side does not want to give an inch without taking a quarter. The common space for Singaporeans is getting smaller instead of bigger.”

GOVERNMENT’S APPROACH: HANDS-OFF OR NOT?

National University of Singapore sociologist Paulin Tay Straughan said the increasing diversity of views should not come as a surprise. “No society is homogenous. Social cohesion is not about ‘one Singapore, one voice’. It is about how different groups with different interests can coexist in Singapore,” she noted. Fellow NUS sociologist Tan Ern Ser added that the phenomenon is “not necessarily a bad thing if it leads to new ways of accommodating and understanding one another”.

In such an environment, the Government should take a more laid-back approach, some political watchers argued. Singapore Management University Associate Professor Eugene Tan said: “The Government should not be too hasty to intervene, unless there is a clear danger to public order, life or property.” It should also be mindful not to take sides as contending groups would seek to secure its endorsement, tacit or otherwise, he added.

However, Chua Chu Kang GRC Member of Parliament Zaqy Mohamad felt the Government should take on a more proactive role in facilitating discussion and bring contending groups and individuals towards the middle ground.

“(It) should create platforms or be the platform, where people come together to hear one another’s views and needs. We can then match these needs and come to a compromise,” he said, citing animal welfare as an issue where more talks among stakeholders are needed to chart the way forward.

The relevant government agencies should spearhead discussions on issues related to them. “This allows agencies to adapt or update regulations to changing norms,” Mr Zaqy said. The Our Singapore Conversation project was a good model to emulate, he said, adding that opportunities to engage must be made available to the public, not only to vocal interest groups.

Senior Minister of State (Foreign Affairs and Home Affairs) Masagos Zulkifli reiterated that while the Government would try its best to allocate resources in the fairest way possible and come up with policies that benefit everyone, there would always be trade-offs. “There are just too many competing interests. If (Singapore’s) diversity is not to become a source of weakness, we must manage such disagreements in a responsible and balanced manner,” he said.

MAJORITY VS MINORITY

Increasingly, the authorities would find themselves caught in the middle, sometimes between preserving the view of the majority and protecting minority interests.

Assoc Prof Eugene Tan argued that democracy is not only about looking after the majority. “There is no reason minorities’ views should not have standing in Singapore, so long as they are not illegal and do not undermine Singapore,” he said.

“Without a common purpose, society will be directionless. But shared values are critical in guiding (us on) how we achieve our common purpose. These values will have to be developed organically — not legislated or imposed upon — by stakeholders over repeated engagements,” he added.

Dr Chong believes foreign workers and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender activists, for example, should be given greater protection. He added that, in today’s environment, the Government is required to spend more time and effort on the ground.

“There is a strong sense of scepticism among the younger electorate. They are less likely to take the Government’s decisions at face value,” he noted, adding that the Government has to refrain from going into “defence mode” when better ideas are raised outside officialdom.

Assoc Prof Tan Ern Ser felt the Government should serve as a mediator that ensures Singaporeans continue to prioritise national interests. In cases where views are polarised, the Government must appeal for unity and “nudge citizens towards superordinate goals and values”, he suggested.

The NLB saga was an example where the board’s eventual decision to transfer the books to the adult section was a reasonable outcome, he said, acknowledging that having a consensus on what constitutes national interests is not always achievable. “Nonetheless, there should be room for negotiation, bargaining and compromise. On some matters, it should be possible to agree to disagree,” he said.

SOCIAL COHESION: NOT A ZERO-SUM GAME

Interest groups also have to play their part, with Mr Zaqy stressing that an attitude of give and take is necessary to ensure social cohesion.

Nevertheless, Mr Masagos noted that people would not make concessions involving deeply held religious beliefs or issues such as homosexuality. In such instances, groups and individuals must respect differences. “Our society will likely not reach consensus on homosexuality for a long time to come. Every group, whether religious or secular, has to exercise restraint and show respect and tolerance. If any group pushes its agenda aggressively, there will be strong reactions from other groups,” he said.

Assoc Prof Tan said it is important that contending groups engage one another directly. This would enable the groups to clarify misconceptions, reduce suspicion and may even help establish common ground, he said. “For this to happen, the openness of minds is a prerequisite. The goal of direct engagement is not to ‘convert’ the other, but rather to have both sides articulate and understand each other’s positions,” he added. Alluding to Mr Goh’s comments, he said he was more concerned about the “closing of the Singapore mind”.

He said: “It all begins with our mindset — how do we approach difference, how do we disagree and how do we agree to disagree? If the mindset is an uncompromising one — one that sees an opposing view as an existential threat to one’s own values — then such an attitudinal posture will mean that internal divisions will be the order of the day.”

Contending groups must recognise the merits of other views and not adopt a zero-sum approach, Assoc Prof Tan added. “We should respect the right of other views and values to exist even if we fundamentally object to them.”

Agreeing, Prof Straughan said passionate Singaporeans must learn the art of political activism. "They must champion their passions in a manner that draws like-minded people who can ride the bandwagon, and that involves toning down. Those who advance their causes at all costs will polarise society."

She added: "With intersecting passions, different groups and individuals will be glued in different ways, like a collage with different pieces. That is what a passionate society embraces."